DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 151 EA 008 485

AUTHOR Flores, Nancy
TITLE Appreciating Linguistic Varieties.
INSTITUTION Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, Tex.
PUB DATE [Feb 76]
NOTE 4p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Ethnic Stereotypes; *Language Fluency; *Language Standardization; Racial Discrimination; Standard Spoken Usage

ABSTRACT

There is evidence that attitudes toward speakers of nonstandard English are determined more by the speaker's race than by linguistic considerations. Many people who do not speak standard English have done well in American society because stigma was not attached to their particular language variety. More emphasis should be placed on appreciating individual differences and functional aspects of communication and less on diagnosing the "linguistic problems" of children of limited English-speaking ability. (Author/IRT)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED125151

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

APPRECIATING LINGUISTIC VARIETIES

By Nancy Flores
Intercultural Development Research Association

One of the most widely accepted premises among linguists is that all varieties of a language are equally valid systems of communication, and that they are therefore equally deserving of respect. On the other hand, it is widely known that all languages and varieties of language do not receive the same respect. Social stereotypes are attached to varieties of language and to those who employ them.

Martin Joos has argued that a community's choice of what shall count as the norm and what shall be rated as "bad" (in general, even by those who use it) apparently is an arbitrary choice, so that "usage is never good nor bad, but thinking makes it so." The application of value or stigma to various styles of expression is totally arbitrary and socially defined.

The so-called "non-standard" varieties of a language are built on systematic grammatical rules which are internalized by the speakers of that variety in the same manner that speakers of the so-called "standard" variety internalize grammatical rules. However, there is little disagreement that it is desirable, if not necessary, to speak the "standard" variety of English in the United States for social and economic mobility. For this reason, educators have concerned themselves greatly with teaching "linguistically different" children to speak "correct English."

There has been much debate about the best approach for helping children learn to speak English "correctly." Basically, the arguments center around the degree of prescriptivism with which the non-standard speaker should be approached,

EA 008 485

i.e., (1) how much of his own language variety should be done away with or retained and (2) how much of the standard should be emphasized--grammar only or pronunciation as well?

The approach has been to diagnose student problems with the language and prescribe remedies or drills for improving the child's skills. Most educators have had the best intentions in mind, believing strongly that standard English is a prerequisite for "making it" in the American society. However, as James Sledd of the University of Texas at Austin and others have pointed out, this is not true. Many people who do not speak standard English have done well because a stigma was not attached to their language variety.

Various research studies in the social sciences have demonstrated that listeners evaluate a speaker's personality, ethnicity, education and intelligence on the basis of language behavior. In such studies, the language serves as the independent variable which is manipulated to elicit differences in attitudes toward the language stimuli. The aim is to isolate the language stimuli as the only variable affecting variation in attitudes.

Several of these studies have revealed that listeners react to the linguistic cues from speech samples in a stereotyped manner. Other studies have revealed that a speaker's race is more of a determining factor of reactions than are linguistic cues. In a study conducted by Frederick Williams and his associates, teachers rated videotaped speech samples of Black and Mexican American children as more non-standard and ethnic sounding than those of white children. The teachers did not know that the same speech sample was utilized to represent each child. It was the visual image of the child that elicited stereotyped reactions, regardless of the standard cues in the speech sample.

With this in mind, it seems almost absurd for educators to wring their hands and fret about a child not being able to "rid himself of this accent." The accent or non-standardness of one's speech is not inherently "bad," but is arbitrarily so. While a Mexican American child is made to feel pressure to enunciate carefully the differnece between "ch" and "sh," Henry Kissinger is lauded as a proficient spokesman for the American people despite his heavy German accent. These inequities reveal the arbitrary and unjust pressure placed on minority children to learn to "sound white."

More emphasis should be placed on appreciating individual differences and functional aspects of communication and less on diagnosing the "linguistic problems" of children of limited English-speaking ability. We need to evaluate our value systems and to what extent our reactions to others are triggered by what we know to be true. If we can teach our students to value their own language and each other's individuality, perhaps we can affect the enormous task of changing negative attitudes toward language variations.